

PATENT SPECIFICATION

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(71) We, THE WELDING INSTITUTE, a British Company, of Abington Hall, Abington, Cambridge, CB1 6AL, do hereby declare the invention, for which we pray that a patent may be granted to and the method by which it is to be performed, to be particularly described in and by the following statement:—

In welding of metals with a laser, the penetration which is achieved may be limited by a plasma which is formed in the weld region. The plasma is produced by interaction of the laser beam with metal vapour and gases near to the workpiece. This limitation of penetration results from the scattering of the laser beam by the plasma and by the absorption of the beam by the plasma; although some of the absorbed beam energy is transmitted by conduction to the workpiece, the conducted energy does not result in deep penetration.

It is known to direct a tube, through which flows a jet of gas, obliquely at the area of intersection of the laser beam and workpiece, the object being to disrupt the plasma by means of the gas jet. Although this results in some improvement in penetration, the penetration still falls far short of what could be achieved in the absence of the plasma. It is also known in cutting by means of a laser to direct a gas jet at the area of intersection of the laser beam and workpiece, in order to blow away the molten or evaporated material.

Welding apparatus according to the present invention comprises means for directing a laser beam at a workpiece weld zone and plasma-control means for directing a gas jet at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the laser beam, the plasma-control means comprising a first gas conduit leading to an outlet section with a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6 mm² and arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the laser beam, the apparatus further comprising a second gas conduit, for shielding gas, leading to the region of the intersection of the laser beam and the plasma control jet to form a gas shield around the said intersection region, the shielding gas being provided to reduce the possibility of contamination or porosity of the

weld zone into which the plasma is blown by the plasma-control jet. A cross-sectional area of 19.6mm² corresponds to a tube with a circular outlet of 5mm diameter. Preferably the outlet is considerably smaller than this, not greater than 3.5mm² and we find it most advantageous to use a tube not much greater than 1mm diameter. The angle of this tube is preferably between 25° and 35° and in our preferred arrangement it is substantially 30°; the outermost part of its end is preferably substantially flush with the end of the housing.

The invention also consists in a method of welding workpieces in which a laser beam is directed at the workpiece zone and plasma control is effected by a gas jet directed at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the laser beam, and in which the plasma control jet is a jet of inert gas directed from a first gas conduit towards the said weld zone from a tube the bore of which has a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6mm² and is arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the incident laser beam, the jet blowing the plasma into the weld zone, and in which a shielding gas from a second gas conduit is directed to the region around the intersection of the laser beam and the plasma control gas jet to form a gas shield around the said intersection region.

In a method embodying the present invention, the plasma-controlling gas is preferably helium. We have found that the best results are obtained when the plasma is blown right through the weld zone by the plasma control jet.

In the prior systems utilising a plasma-controlling gas jet, the gas jet has been used to blow the plasma away over the surface of the workpiece. Even with this jet a large molten zone is formed at the top of the weld at low travel speeds, typically less than 25 inches per minute, and penetration is therefore limited. When a plasma-controlling jet outlet with the above-mentioned cross section and arranged at an angle to the axis of the laser beam within the above-mentioned range of angles, is used, the gas jet blows the plasma into the weld zone. This leads to a welding "mechanism" which resembles in some respects

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those known types of welding (for example, electron beam welding and keyhole plasma arc welding) in which deep penetration takes place, that is to say the energy passes deep into the workpiece. In such processes it is believed that evaporation results in a depressed weld cavity maintained open by the interaction of the repulsion due to the evaporation and the surface tension forces which try to close the capillary. With the proposed invention it is thought that the capillary is also held open by reaction between liquid and gas jet in addition to vaporisation forces.

The recovery of heat from the plasma consequent upon the plasma being blown into the weld cavity improves the penetration obtained and effects the weld shape for a given power.

Using the method according to the present invention, welds can be performed at a slower speed than would be possible without the blowing of the plasma into the weld zone by the plasma-controlling jet whilst maintaining a narrow weld profile. Slow-speed welds are sometimes desirable and in fact certain materials (for example some structural steels) cannot be welded by lasers at high speed owing to cracking problems. Prior to this invention, laser welding was limited to speeds above approximately 25 inches per minute for high depth-to-width ratio welds. Using the invention, welds can be made at speeds as low as 10 inches a minute. The invention enables deeper welds to be made at a given power than would be possible without plasma control.

In the preferred form of apparatus embodying the invention a shielding gas is also supplied to a trailing hood to form a trailing shield, i.e. a cover of shielding gas following the weld and protecting the weld while it is still hot. These flows of shielding gas help to protect the weld from oxidation. Finally, in apparatus employing a lens, there may be a flow of gas through the end of the lens housing to protect the lens, this gas being also preferably an inert gas and forming an annular shield around the beam axis.

Thus, there are preferably four streams of shielding gas, all helping to prevent oxidation of the weld and all helping to ensure that the plasma generated is a plasma of the shielding gas together with some metal vapour and not in air. Helium may be used for each of these four streams. Such an arrangement permits the plasma to be controlled more easily and therefore permits much deeper penetration and additionally gives a clean weld.

It will be appreciated that the invention may be embodied in an attachment for a standard laser welder. An auxiliary device according to the invention, for use in laser-beam welding apparatus comprises a nozzle open at each end to allow the passage of the laser beam through and along the axis of the

nozzle to a workpiece weld zone and plasma-control means for directing a gas jet at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the nozzle axis, the plasma-control means comprising a first gas conduit leading to an outlet section with a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6mm² and arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the axis of the nozzle, the device further comprising a second gas conduit, for shielding gas, leading to the region of the intersection of the said nozzle axis and the plasma-control jet from the said first conduit to form a gas shield around the said intersection region, the shielding gas being provided to reduce the possibility of contamination or porosity of the weld zone into which the plasma is blown by the plasma-control jet. This housing may also make provision for other gas streams, and in particular for gas flow designed to reduce entrainment of air through the top of the attachment.

In order that the invention may be better understood, two examples of apparatus embodying the invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:—

Figure 1 illustrates the welding head of a laser welder, with integrated focusing system, embodying the invention; and

Figure 2 shows an attachment for use with a laser welding head to form apparatus embodying the present invention with remote optics.

In Figure 1, an unfocused laser beam entering the welding head in the direction of the arrow 1 is reflected by a 45° mirror (not shown) located in a mirror holder 2 and adjustable by means of mirror controls 3. The reflected beam travels towards a lens 4 which in this example has a diameter of 50 millimetres and which can be adjusted axially in the welding head by means of the ring 5. The beam, focused by the lens 4, passes through a nozzle 6, the internal cross-section of which tapers to a region close to the exit of the laser beam, at which region there is a short cylindrical section 7 surrounded by an annular housing 8. When the apparatus is in use, the end of the cylindrical section 7 and housing 8 may be used as close as is practical to the workpiece and this is typically 1—3 mm.

A gas conduit 9 passes through the cylindrical section 7 of the nozzle. The end section 10 of this conduit constitutes the plasma control gas jet nozzle. In the example shown, the diameter is not greater than 2 millimetres but it will be appreciated that it is not essential to employ a conduit of circular section. Also in the example shown, the end section 10 of the gas conduit 9 makes the preferred angle of about 30° with the incident laser beam (60° to the horizontal) but can be varied within the range 20° to 50° (70° to

40° to the horizontal).

As previously explained, the plasma-control gas jet from the gas conduit 9 blows the plasma into the weld cavity resulting in heat transfer into the weld zone. The gas used is preferably helium. Preferably, the plasma is blown right through the weld zone, i.e. a full penetration weld is made with the jet exiting from the rear of the weld.

A gas conduit 11 communicates with the annular shield 8 surrounding the intersection of the laser beam and the emerging jet of gas from the end section 10 of the conduit 9. The gas which is supplied to the shield 8 through the conduit 11 is an inert gas and has for its purpose a reduced entrainment of air from the surrounding atmosphere, thereby substantially to prevent contamination and porosity in the weld zone into which the plasma is blown.

A third gas conduit 12 communicates with the open lower side of a trailing hood 13 to provide a trailing shield covering the weld for a short time after the weld has passed the laser beam. The gas supplied to the conduit 12 is also an inert gas.

Finally in the example shown, a gas inlet 14 leads directly into the nozzle 6 and the purpose of the gas flow through this passage is to protect the lens 4 and to provide an inert gas flow directly over the weld pool.

A ring 15 permits adjustment of the height of the lower end of the weld head with respect to the body of the weld head.

In Figure 2, there is shown an alternative auxiliary shielding device for use with a conventional laser welder but separate from the laser deflecting and focusing apparatus. This auxiliary shielding device is placed close to the workpiece. The plasma-control gas conduit terminates in an end section 10 making an angle of about 40° with the axis of the nozzle 16 through which the laser beam passes, the lower end of the section 10 emerging close to the lower face of the nozzle 16. Once again, as in Figure 1 there is a gas inlet 11 for supplying inert gas to an outer annular shield 8 and a gas conduit 12 for supplying inert gas to a trailing shield 13.

The fourth gas supply is rather different in Figure 2. An inlet 17 leads to an annular chamber 18 coaxial with the axis of the nozzle 16, the inner wall of the annular chamber 18 being formed to leave an annular slot 19 to permit gas to pass into the central space within the housing. The inner wall of the nozzle has a shape such that most of the gas passing into the central space from the annular chamber 18 is directed downward towards the workpiece. Some of the gas however, passes upwards within the central space and emerges through the open top of the nozzle shown in the auxiliary device of Figure 2. This upwardly flowing gas reduces the entrainment of air through the open top of the

auxiliary device and thereby helps to reduce oxidation of the weld area.

In both examples, the flow rate for the plasma control jet is preferably 2—10 litres/minute and the flow rate for each of the other gas supplies is 2—15 litres/minute. Because the diameter of the plasma control jet is relatively small its velocity is of course very much higher than that of the remaining gas flows.

Although in these examples a shield 8 of annular form has been shown, it would be possible to provide a gas outlet at one side of the intersection of the laser beam and plasma-control jet and to create a shielding gas flow across the weld area.

Use of the plasma-controlling devices described above with a 2Kw laser enables welds up to 5 mm deep to be made in steel.

WHAT WE CLAIM IS:—

1. Welding apparatus comprising means for directing a laser beam at a workpiece weld zone and plasma-control means for directing a gas jet at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the laser beam, the plasma-control means comprising a first gas conduit leading to an outlet section with a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6 mm² and arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the laser beam, the apparatus further comprising a second gas conduit, for shielding gas, leading to the region of the intersection of the laser beam and the plasma-control jet to form a gas shield around the said intersection region, the shielding gas being provided to reduce the possibility of contamination or porosity of the weld zone into which the plasma is blown by the plasma-control jet.

2. Apparatus in accordance with claim 1, in which the said outlet section of the first gas conduit has a cross-sectional area of not more than 3.5 mm².

3. Apparatus in accordance with claim 1 or 2, in which the said outlet section of the first gas conduit is arranged at an angle of between 25° and 35° to the laser beam.

4. Apparatus in accordance with claim 3, in which the angle of the said outlet section of the first gas conduit is substantially 30° in respect to the laser beam.

5. Apparatus in accordance with claim 1, further comprising an annular housing surrounding the said laser beam and communicating with the second gas conduit to provide the gas shield around the intersection region.

6. Apparatus in accordance with claim 5, in which the outermost part of the end of the said first gas conduit is substantially flush with the end of the said housing.

7. Apparatus in accordance with any one of the preceding claims, comprising a hood extending from the end of the welding head

and having a cavity facing the workpiece, the cavity communicating with a further inert gas conduit, the hood functioning to provide a trailing shield for parts which have recently passed under the laser beam when the apparatus is in operation.

8. Apparatus in accordance with any one of claims 1 to 7 further comprising an inert gas inlet communicating with the interior of a nozzle through which the laser beam passes for providing a flow of gas directly over the weld zone.

9. Apparatus in accordance with any one of the claims 1 to 8, wherein each of the said gas conduits is connected to a source of helium gas.

10. A method of welding workpieces in which a laser beam is directed at the workpiece zone and plasma-control is effected by a gas jet directed at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the laser beam, and in which the plasma-control jet is a jet of inert gas directed from a first gas conduit towards the said weld zone from a tube the bore of which has a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6 mm² and is arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the incident laser beam, the jet blowing the plasma into the weld zone, and in which a shielding gas from a second gas conduit is directed to the region around the intersection of the laser beam and the plasma-control gas jet to form a gas shield around the said intersection region.

11. A method in accordance with claim 10, in which the plasma-control jet blows the plasma through the rear of the weld zone.

12. A method according to claim 10 or 11, in which the gas supplied to the plasma-control gas conduit is helium.

13. An auxiliary device for use in laser-beam welding apparatus, comprising a nozzle open at each end to allow the passage of the laser beam through and along the axis of the nozzle to a workpiece weld zone and plasma-control means for directing a gas jet at plasma created by the interaction of the laser beam and the workpiece material, the gas jet intersecting the nozzle axis, the plasma-control means comprising a first gas conduit leading to an outlet section with a cross-sectional area of not more than 19.6 mm² and arranged at an angle of 20° to 50° to the axis of the nozzle, the device further comprising a second gas conduit, for shielding gas, leading to the region of the intersection of the said nozzle axis and the plasma-control jet from the said first conduit to form a gas shield around the said intersection region, the shielding gas being provided to reduce the possibility of contamination or porosity of the weld zone into which the plasma is blown by the plasma-control jet.

14. Welding apparatus in accordance with claim 1, substantially as herein described with reference to Figure 1 of the accompanying drawings.

15. An auxiliary welding device in accordance with claim 13, substantially as herein described with reference to Figure 2 of the accompanying drawings.

16. A method of welding workpieces in accordance with claim 10, substantially as herein described.

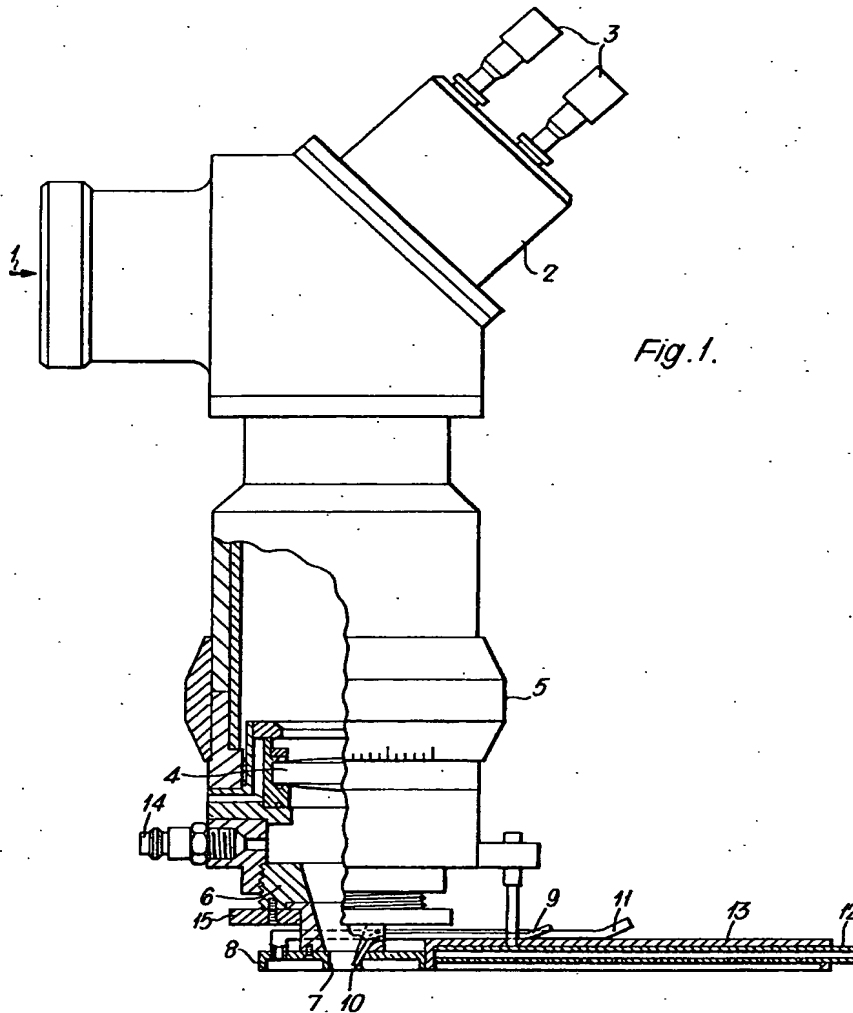
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COMPLETE SPECIFICATION

2 SHEETS

This drawing is a reproduction of
the Original on a reduced scale
Sheet 1



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Fig. 2.

